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SUBJECT: KAZAKHSTAN: ALMATY NOTES, SEPTEMBER 29 - OCTOBER 11, 2008

¶1. The "Almaty Notes" series is intended to maintain focus on developments in civil society, the media, and the opposition in Kazakhstan's "southern capital" following the move of the Embassy to Astana.

STUDENT ADVOCACY GROUP AGAINST HIGHER TUITION

¶2. Bakhytzhan Toregozhina, head of the Ar Rukh Hak Fund, a student advocacy group, reports that universities in Almaty increased tuition by an average of 30 percent this past year. Ar Rukh Hak sent inquiries to 17 universities requesting information on how they set their tuition rates. Eleven sent responses. Ar Rukh Hak intends to file suit with the Almaty Economic Court to force the others to respond.

PENSIONERS BRING APPEAL TO OSCE OFFICE

¶3. On September 29, a group of Almaty pensioners brought to the OSCE office in Almaty an appeal they had sent to President Nazarbayev complaining that their pensions do not cover the high costs of food and utilities. The pensioners explained that numerous appeals they had sent directly to Nazarbayev, other senior officials, and the Nur Otan party have gone unanswered.

PUBLIC COUNCIL'S MEETING ON ILLEGAL CONSTRUCTION

¶4. "Vremya" reported on October 1 that Almaty's Public Council on Social Conflicts -- a newly-established body which includes representatives of the city government, the ruling Nur Otan party, opposition parties, and NGOs -- met on September 30 to discuss housing issues. Shanyrak movement leader Asylbek Kozhakmetov raised the issue of houses illegally constructed by migrants in Almaty's newly-formed Alatau district, which is located on the city's outskirts. Bagdat Manzorov, head of the Alatau district administration, reported that a special commission on housing and land issues would review the situation and then make a decision regarding the legalization of such structures. Following the meeting, however, Manzorov announced that houses constructed without any legal documentation would be demolished.

FIRST SANCTIONED DEMONSTRATION OF "DOLSHIKI"

15. For the very first time, the Almaty mayor office's sanctioned a protest of Almaty's "dolshiki" -- city residents who invested their savings into the construction of apartments that have not been completed. Approximately 1,000 people participated in the demonstration, which was held on October 11 and initiated by the Talmas movement. Several opposition and NGO leaders -- including Petr Svoik of the Azat party, Amirbek Togusov of the National Social Democratic party, and Aynur Kurmanov of the Talmas movement -- gave speeches at the protest. The demonstrators called for lowering the interest rates on their mortgages and for a three-year moratorium on mortgage repayments. They announced their intention to hold similar protest actions across the country on a regular basis.

CONSTRUCTION COMPANIES CHARGED WITH EMBEZZLEMENT

16. According to an October 6 report on TAN television, so far this year, the Financial Police in Almaty and Astana have filed 19 criminal cases against construction companies. The companies have all been charged with embezzling investors' money. According to the Prosecutor General's office, seven individuals have thus far been convicted in connection with these cases.

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